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AUTHOR Flores, Norma Landa
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ABSTRACT

Speech communication teachers of Latino students and non-native speakers of English experience problems in accomodating these students in mainstream monolingual-monocultural classrooms. Earlier research about these students shows that they have low perceptions of their communication competence, and high communication apprehension when speaking English if they come from a Spanish-speaking ethnic environment. The dearth of bilingual or minority teachers has caused an inequitable teaching climate in which Latinos are not being extended the opportunity to acquire the communication competencies that they need to assimilate into the dominant culture's social, learning, and working mainstream. A practical solution seems to be the one recommended by the California Speech Communication Association (CSCA). Their plan takes a collaborative culturally diverse training package approach to be developed in two stages. The first stage deals with validation of claims made by teachers of Latino students that they are using correct methodology but that skill enhancement is needed. Also, development of a standardized ESL testing battery is encouraged. The second stage deals with training CSCA members and outside individuals to be multicultural trainers. These people would then train others, and establish a network of multiculturally-aware teachers at all important locations. (PA)

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Meeting the Challenge of Improving the Oral Communication Competence of At-Risk Latino Students

Norma Landa Flores, Speech Instructor
Golden West College, Huntington Beach, CA.

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presented to the SCA 1991 Panel :

OUTREACH:SPEECH COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS AND THE "AT-RISK" STUDENT

Atlanta, Georgia

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The Problem, from the point of view of speech communication teachers of Latino and non-native speakers of English students, is that there are not enough bilingual and minority teachers to handle the large increase of Limited English Proficient and English as a second language students that now find themselves in their mainstream monolingual-monocultural classrooms. According to Jim Parker, research coordinator for the Los Angeles county Office of Education, "an additional 20,000 new bilingual teachers will be needed statewide over the next 10 years, but only 415 students that graduated from California colleges last year qualified to appply for state bilingual teaching credentials and that is nowhere near enough."

In terms of oral communication, Latino students and non-native speakers of English fall into the at-risk category because they encounter unique communication problems such as,"high rates of limited English proficiency, possess nonstandard language variations or dialects, live in environments which restricts options and opportunities for the development of oral communication skills, and have experienced prior education failures which affects their readiness to communicate orally" (Delpit, 1988; and the National Center for Education Statistics, 1990).

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These factors prompted research into "Communication Apprehension and Self-Perceived Communication Competence of At-Risk Students" (McCroskey, Atwater, Bahrenfus, Cavelti, Chesebro, Gaudino, & Hodges, 1991). The results show that Latino students were classified

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as (1) being apprehensive about communication in dyads or small groups with teachers or other students; (2) having low perceptions of their communication competence with everyone except in circumstances involving friends and; (3) having high communication apprehension when speaking English if they came from a Spanish speaking ethnic environment but having low communication apprehension when speaking Spanish if they came from a Spanish speaking ethnic environment.

These apprehensive Latino communicators can be found in classrooms across the nation from Puerto Rico to California and all points in between. In California, for example, more than half of the state's 4.7 million students are members of minority groups. One out of six was born in another country and one in four speaks a language other than English at home with Spanish being the most often reported "other" language spoken at home. (Olsen, 1991)

The fact that Latino students are attending our K-12 classrooms in ever increasing numbers and that we have less and less bilingual or minority teachers prepared to deal with their communication apprehension, has caused an inequitable teaching climate in which Latinos are not being extended the opportunity to acquire the communication competencies they need in order to assimilate into the dominant culture's social, learning and working mainstream. If we let this condition continue, Latino students will be the victims of discrimination. According to the Congress' General Accounting Office:

> The landmark 1986 immigration law, which penalized employers of illegal aliens, has produced a widespread 'pattern of discrimination' against job applicants with a 'foreign appearance or accent'---even citizens and green card holders. (Yzaguirre, 1990)

The cause of this intentional or unintentional discrimination is twofold. First, bilingual and minority teacher preparation programs have traditionally focused on language arts curriculum for English as a second language teachers. These programs focus on reading and writing more than speaking. Even if they speak in class, the interaction is evaluated micro-linguistically rather than macro-linguistically, which is what communication competency is based on. Thus,

ESL training doesn't provide teachers with methods of facilitating competency based oral communication behaviors in Latino students.

Second, schools of education and teacher preparation programs, including speech communication teacher preparation programs, are mostly staffed by white, monocultural, monolingual Ph.D.'s who have not experienced linguistic, ethnic, economic and racial cultural shock simultaneously. It is difficult for them to empathize with Latino and minority student teachers' search for methods to bridge cultural differences they can't imagine , but they need to keep their tenured positions, so they instruct their teachers to transform Latinos into mainstream speakers by providing them with "awareness" approaches to cultural sensitivity. Awareness is not enough. In this case the unaware is attempting to lead the partially aware and that is the cause of the problem.

Before we can solve the problem, we need to take this criteria into consideration: First, our solution should reverse any discriminatory behaviors against Latino students in speech communication classes. Second, our solution should provide more incentives for Latinos and other minorities to enroll in multicultural teacher preparation programs. Third, teacher preparation programs need to guarantee their existing staff's positions while they gain the necessary knowledge to develop multicultural training programs.

In order to meet the challenge of improving the oral communication competency of at-risk Latino students, two solutions will be compared. The alternative solution is what I gleaned from the discussions held at the Summer SCA At-Risk Conference at Golden West College in July. The plan was not actually articulated. To be more specific, there was only one Latina speech communication professional present at the conference. Three or four papers discussed the need to be aware of linguistic problems and the communication apprehension this could invoke. A few other papers urged speech professionals to be culturally sensitive when they had Hispanics in class. The consensus seemed to be that Latino problems were not a significant factor in being at-risk. Therefore, broader non-culture specific methods of motivating at-risk students were

proposed. The use of multi-media such as videos , comic books, interaction with volunteer tutors and intercultural awareness journals was strongly recommended by the SCA Conference. The disadvantage is that none of these approaches remove the discrimination Latinos face due their lack of communication competence as perceived by the mainstream culture. Furthermore Latino and other minority students are not provided with the experience of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating their multicultural teaching methods under the direction of teacher prepartion program staff members.

A more practical solution seems to be one that is being recommended by the California Speech Communication Association. Their plan takes a collaborative culturally diverse training package approach to be developed in two stages. The first stage deals with Latino teacher and student empowerment by requesting that the SCA validate teachers of Latino students' claim that they are using oral communication methodologies but need to enhance their skills. It also urges the SCA to adapt an equitable, standardized assessment of ESL speaking skills that is criterion-referenced in order to identify the students' level of proficiency and develop curriculum that will bridge the differences in proficiency to yield competency.

The second stage deals with the CSCA's short term and long term goals. Their short term goals are to develop a "Train the Trainers" teaching package for culturally diverse needs, pilot test it, and train interested CSCA members and selected trainers from the private sector and bilingual education staff development coordinators who would be certified as multicultural trainers by the CSCA. Their long term goals are to establish networks of professionals who teach speech communication and have academic background and experience in ESL, linguistics, developmental education and interact with the Latino community , and are vocal in support of the need for oral communication in education and the workforce. The CSCA would establish standards and guide-lines that trainers need to follow and criteria that must be met . Their long term goals include investigating where training sites should be located such as four year universities, community colleges or high schools. Finally, their long term plans call for providing avenues for publica-

tion of bilingual-multicultural CSCA developed training manuals, assessment instruments, resource bibliographies and video tapes for sale to organizations wanting the training (Ratliffe and Flores, 1991).

The advantages of adapting this solution to the problems at-risk Latino students face in obtaining equitable instruction of communication competency skills, are that Latino and non-native speakers of English speech communication students will acquire the tools they need to overcome English speaking communication apprehension as well as learn how to communicate multiculturally in order to function in the mainstream culture. The underrepresented Latino and other minority students in teacher preparation programs will have certified trainers, adequate resources and objective guidelines to follow in order to facilitate multicultural communication in their classrooms. The teacher preparation program specialists can collaborate with other speech/langauge/bilingual education professionals to research, design, test, and teach their new multicultural product, thus retain their tenured positions competently.

In conclusion, I believe the challenge of improving the oral communication competency of at-risk Latino students was side-stepped by those present at the Summer SCA At-Risk Conference. As an advocate for Latino speech communication competency, I suggest that the SCA At-Risk Committee include the California Speech Communication Association's plan for providing equitable communiucation learning experiences for at-risk Latino students.

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